

Admissions Tools at a Crossroads: Technology versus the Timeless

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Enrollment managers are awash in a sea of change. With each academic year, we attempt to harness the new recruitment opportunities that arise through a varying array of technologies. Since we know that each incoming class is more technologically savvy than the previous one, we work hard to keep up. Technology allows us to reach more students than ever before, given all the ways that students now choose to communicate. But, some caveats come with choosing innovation, especially if those technologies are replacing still-successful, proven methods of recruitment and interaction.

At Newbury College we are constantly attempting to utilize new media to incorporate their capabilities into our recruitment processes. Although we pride ourselves on our significant relationships with local high schools in surrounding communities, we are always endeavoring to reach beyond the region's borders and contact students from across the Northeast, the nation, and the international community. Moreover, we want to accomplish this using the most efficient and cost-effective methods possible.

The most common form of initial communication with students is an e-mail invitation to join a school's mailing list. Once the student has "opted in," colleges can send out invitations to share in specific on-campus activities, and to receive greetings from various faculty, students, and staff, thus prompting students to apply.

E-mail works in conjunction with several other media. Text messages

and Webcasts are becoming more common as they replace more costly methods of delivery, like mailing bulky view books and the requisite mail flow that follows. Of course, another one of the most useful technology-based recruitment media is the college Website.

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The Website is the first place students and families go to learn more about a "product." A college Website serves as a window into campus life; it sets a tone for the school. Since the Website is also a portal for current students, alumni and faculty members, visitors can leave the site with a good idea of current campus events, academic programs and scheduling, and the values of the college. Of course, if the Website is not well organized, students will leave without responding to a call to action. The key is designing a site wherein students can find what they are looking for. If a prospective student is planning a trip to our campus, for instance, he or she could look on our Website to check when certain events that they may want to attend are taking place. Likewise, we list the menu for our culinary school's dining room for members of the community to view before making reservations. On many Websites, prospective students can take 360-degree tours of campus.

Some colleges use the Website to list admissions events and provide prospective students with the ability to register for those events. Once students decide to apply to a college, they can often use their college's Website to find admissions requirements and to understand and calculate

their financial aid and, if necessary, lending options. At Newbury, once admitted, students can use our Website for most activities associated with enrollment, from applying for housing to preparing for orientation and their first semester on campus.

Current Web-based technologies provide a host of opportunities for admission recruitment. A presence on social networking Websites and other interactive resources can have an enormous effect on the image a college projects, for instance — and most colleges are approaching these options carefully. Active online alumni networks and online outreach programs to prospects can demonstrate to students that we are familiar and comfortable with the newest technologies. Encouraging faculty to Webcast their lectures and to assign inventive projects, which can be reflected on the Website, sends a great message to visitors. These strategies are designed to "meet students where they live." Effective

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enrollment managers make sure current students assist with these kinds of communication. I learned a long time ago that students love to hear from other students.

For students without the time or resources to visit campus, Web-based chatting can be a great option that enables them to get a feel for campus life and to provide interactivity as part of the application process. Some colleges use video conferencing as another alternative to interview students from afar. Increasingly, colleges post video content of events and other activities for students who are unable to attend. Admissions staff at some institutions maintain updated blogs to describe to applicants where they should be in the admissions process. As a complement to that, good “ole-fashioned” e-mail remains a popular medium to keep in touch, and our counselors are very busy pounding out many messages during the recruitment cycle. In this era of “do-not-call,” e-mail has in many ways replaced the telephone. Often the most effective communications with students are the instantaneous ones — by cell phone, instant message, or text messaging. We are finding that many students are less intimidated by the prospect of communicating with admissions staff in a more “removed way” through text messaging or instant messaging. This new iteration of young technology users is more comfortable typing than talking.

The downside of today’s technologies is that we begin to see them as ends in themselves, yet nothing can replace the personal contact that occurs when students and admission representatives meet face to face at a college fair or during a campus visit. How do you replace meeting other applicants, current students, or sitting in on a great class?

Many in my field believe that technology is the answer to solving all recruitment dilemmas. Build it and they will come. Not so fast. This is not a space race, where the most advanced Website or recruitment program lays claim to the best students. Paper still matters, as parents weigh in on the admission and enrollment processes, perhaps more than ever. Colleges and universities remain bastions of education and development, both made more possible by the riches of personal interaction.

At the end of the recruitment process, what does this technology — Facebook, blogs, Website videos — attempt to proffer? An in-person experience. Today, we can communicate faster and with more specificity than ever before. We can reach hundreds of thousands of prospective students. Of course, so can the competition.

Each of us still grapples with positioning our institutions so that our mission comes across as unique, our people special, and the outcomes of our educations compelling. To the extent that college enrollment still means having a real experience on a real campus with real buildings and real people, the processes that students use to discover and make these choices should incorporate as many of these “real” (read: non-virtual) experiences as possible in the admission process. Colleges are three-dimensional entities. Let’s do what we can to keep it that way.

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